Satisfying Journal Criteria for Publication

Several years ago in advance of a panel discussion on Journal Publishing Strategy, I did two things in preparation. I first gathered together paper review criteria to which I at the time had ready access, either because the criteria were generally available online, or I had recently reviewed for the journal (I have only recently been asked to join the Editorial Board of APJIS). Though several years have passed and no doubt, several of these journals' guidance will have changed, I think the broad observations distilled continue to be relevant.

Table 1: Review Criteria Distilled From Five Journals' Readily Available Materials

		DSS	JSIS	EJIS	MISQ Review	JAIS	IEEE TEM
	Relevance						
1	**Relevance (to the journal)**	relevance to DSS			is relevant to MISQ Review readers	is relevant to JAIS readers:	relevance to purpose of Transactions
2	**Relevance (to practitioners)**		potential implications to business organizations,	interest to practitioners			makes valuable contribution to practice in engineering & Tech Mgmt
3	**Relevance (to IS researchers)**		topicality	interest to a reasonable segment of the IS community	is timely and deals with a topic likely to appeal to a range of readers .. is particularly germane to readers undertaking research on the topic or doctoral students seeking an understanding of the topic.		
	Rigour						
4	**Methodology / Validity**	validity	methodological and technical adequacy (optional)	is logically and technically correct; research methodology is rigorous and sound; use of theory is appropriate and complete	theoretical constructs clearly identified - central constructs of the topic and, where appropriate, causes, intervening processes, and outcomes, are specified; units of analysis clearly stated; propositions fully stated (optional) - propositions state how constructs are related to each other - propositions are logically consistent and not tautological.	methodology: research design, statistical methods, instruments, data analysis correct and appropriate; evidence supports author arguments and objective	is logically and methodologically correct
5	**References**		adequacy of references; proper reference to key articles in the chosen topic area	references appropriate and complete	literature review is complete and integrated; relevant literature fully/ accurately discussed and synthesized; important sources not omitted.	literature review complete:	references are adequate
	Clarity						
6	**Title**		appropriateness of the title	title and abstract are appropriate	title is meaningful and appropriate		
7	**Abstract**		abstract communicates key points of the paper		abstract is clear and informative		
8	**Clarity**	clarity	clarity of exposition		objectives clear - introduction focuses reader's attention on topic … authors state explicitly article's purpose; why topic is important.	objectives Clear and well defined:	
	Presentation						
9	**Illustrations and Tables**		use of illustrations or tables		visuals are appropriate - figures and tables aid comprehension and communicate effectively and efficiently		illustrations and tables are necessary and acceptable
10	**Organization and length**		organization and length		the argument flows logically	well-organized with logical flow of argument:	is logically and methodologically correct
11	**English expression**			English is satisfactory	writing is clear and grammatically correct	quality of writing: clear and grammatically correct:	writing style is clear and understandable
	Originality / Contribution						
12	**Originality**	Originality	Innovativeness and novelty				
13	**Contribution**	Information Content	theoretical contribution (i.e., testing, creating, or extending theory - if relevant) empirical contribution (if relevant)	makes a sufficient contribution to research so as to warrant publication in EJIS	is an important contribution - contributes to the development of MIS as an academic discipline by synthesizing prior research and providing a conceptual foundation for future research.	is unique or important contribution (or potential contribution) to the field	makes a valuable contribution to theories, methodologies, and/or policy issues in engineering and tech mgmt

The somewhat random set of journals canvassed was: Decision Support Systems (DSS), Journal of Strategic Information Systems (JSIS), European Journal of Information Systems (EJIS), MISQ Review, Journal of the AIS (JAIS), and IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management.

Through an iterative process of distilling from these sources a set of review criteria and comparing criteria distilled back against source text, I eventually arrived at a set of 13 criteria that seemed to encompass most advice offered. I next explored logical groupings of the 13 criteria, ultimately arriving at five main areas of emphasis to which the journals pay close attention: (i) Relevance, (ii) Rigor, (iii) Clarity, (iv) Presentation, and (v) Contribution. Table 1 cross-references minimally paraphrased text from the 5 representative journals (their related materials), against the 13 criteria, grouped within the five areas. It is appreciated that general criteria must be high-level and reasonably abstract to pertain to the diversity of types of research and types of papers in which the journals are interested.

Several observations can be made from the table. First, we observe reasonable consistency, with most journals commenting on most of the 13 criteria, thereby in some sense instantiating the criteria set. As suggested prior, I believe the 13 criteria account for all salient implicit or explicit criteria distillable from the original source text. Though this was a casual data collection and codification exercise, I think the set can be claimed to be a reasonably complete representation of the sample canvassed. I do apologize to any of the journals I didn't adequately canvass at the time, or whose publicized criteria have changed substantively since. This was not an evaluation but a simple inventory.

The five areas of emphasis offer a simple set against which aspiring authors might assess their work prior to submission. In summary, for a paper to be acceptable, it must be highly relevant to either or both researchers and practitioners, as well as to the specific journal (must fit with the journal ethos and readership). It must be rigorous – logically and methodologically complete and correct. Its intent must be clear and consistent across the full paper. Its presentation of ideas must be well organised and concise and ideally, compelling. And ultimately, it must make an original and substantive contribution (to research, theory and/or practice).

Many aspiring authors will not give adequately careful consideration to these criteria early enough. Some authors will only consider these matters carefully when 'packaging' their research for possible publication, by which time it may be too late, or necessary revision and improvement much more difficult. There is an expression "you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear" suggesting that these criteria are important to consider from the outset, in the design and execution or the 'doing' of the research. Table 2 suggests the relative importance of attending to each of the five areas of focus when 'doing' versus 'packaging' the research. Many would argue that it's important to attend to all five when 'doing'. I suppose the relative importance indicated under 'packaging' is more indicative of aspects with which you can have greater influence at that stage of the overall research lifecycle. I suppose another important message is that 'you have to tick all the boxes'; you must attend to all aspects of the manuscript quality; all criteria, both when doing and ultimately when packaging the work for possible publication.

Table 2: When you have most influence

	Doing	Packaging
Relevance	Hi	Med
Rigor	Hi	Med
Clarity	Med	Hi
Presentation	Med	Hi
Originality	Hi	Med

The second thing I did in preparation for the panel was to canvass internationally by email, a range of well published and notable researchers, asking 'What are the 3 or 4 things you must do right' to get published in good outlets, yielding the following set of 28 'unabridged' recommendations.

Table 3 – Experts' Advice on the 3 or 4 Things You Must Do Right

1	Don't be too ambitious. Don't try to achieve too much within one paper and keep it simple so the reviewers can understand the research. Conservative incrementalism is the nature of the game - a slight improvement or twist on a previously published paper in the journal has the most chance of acceptance because the reviewers have a benchmark for acceptance.
2	Draw relevant implications from the analysis that highlight the significant/contribution of the research.
3	Ensure adequate literature review of prior research, follow proper research methodology, conduct data analysis correctly, interpret results correctly.
4	Get a problem/topic you are really interested in and others are likely to be interested in the answers to the problem as well
5	Get help in writing up (either co-authors or colleagues who read and comment on drafts)
6	Have no methodology errors. Spend time carefully designing the study and demonstrate that the design is sound.
7	Having a research portfolio that includes both "high quality" and lesser quality projects. Of course one can always shoot for the top journals but it is unrealistic -- at least for most of us -- to expect to publish only in top journals.
8	Having a thorough literature review.
9	heterogeneity of the reviewers
10	Hope for luck!!!
11	Hope that you get reviewers who want to help you get published.There are too many who see their mission as searching for flaws and destroying the paper.
12	Key Strategies: Work with others (to tap into to their expertise), reviewers are always correct, plenty of determination.
13	Know the publication outlets: e.g. some journal may appreciate certain kind of research topics (or research conducted by certain kind of methodologies) more than others.
14	Network - It's not what you know, its who you know
15	Presenting the paper at wokshops and conferences as much as possible. The more people hear and critique one's work, the easier it is to improve the paper before sending it out to a journal.
16	Read the Editor's comments to see what they like to see published, as different editors have their own interest areas.
17	Research Design: Designs are getting more sophisticated. Surveys require multiple sources of matched data, and/or longitudinal design. Designs must ensure proper statistical or experimental controls. Research is also more discerning of levels issues than in the past. So, when you are studying individuals in teams, or in various organizations, modeling the constructs at the proper level(s) of analysis is imperative in the current state of the art. Action: think through carefully levels design, and avoid mono-method bias like a plague. The common method bias is the single most fundamental flaw for papers rejected in contemporary survey research.
18	Research Idea: Enter into the current research "conversation." Often times, we find that people are just not reading sufficiently of the latest research in the field. They then motivate their research with wide claims about the 'newness' of their research, when in fact, either hypotheses they are testing have already been studied before, or the theories are old, and there is not enough of a theoretical angle, or hook. Action: READ ! before writing or conducting research. READ widely. Know the research community and audience with whom the research is targeted.
19	Take the time to do the actual study really well (I have had many where I have skimped or rushed at some point then the overall effort is wasted because I dont have enough data or a poorly designed survey insrument or something like that)
20	The most important element in my mind relates to "significance" of the question under study and a clear exposition of why the question is important.
21	The research must be shown to be relevant.
22	The research must be shown to be rigorous. (The interesting questions are: can we have both relevance and rigor?; between relevance and rigor, which would you chose?, etc...)
23	The research must make a contribution
24	Theory: Most hypotheses and selection of variables are not well grounded in theory. Identify an inventory of variables without a coherent framework to support the selection runs into the danger of a paper that is not anchored on theory. Action: identify some theory -- preferably stick with one (and a max of 2) rather than drawing randomly from a smorgasbord of theories to substantiate the selection of variables in your study.
25	Write a good motivation for the research in the introduction.
26	Write for the reviewers and assume that they pedantic nitpickers
27	Write the paper in the style of the papers commonly accepted at the journal you are targeting at.
28	Writing an extremely clear abstract, introduction and conclusion is also crucial. These are the parts that set the tone for the paper and pychologically "anchor" the potential reviwers. It is very crucial to explicate the objective of the paper throughout.

Rather than interpret these, most of which are self-explanatory, I note that most can be readily mapped against the five areas of focus. Several are somewhat more political, including #12 (reviewers are always correct), #14 (it's not what you know, it's who you know), #16 (appeal to the editor's personal interests), and #27 (write in the style of papers published in the journal). #9 'heterogeneity of the reviewers' requires interpretation, and there are several possible interpretations. This could be a more fatalistic comment, perhaps better grouped with #10 and #11 following. I prefer however to think #9 refers to the influence you can have at submission with recommending reviewers, and the merit in recommending reviewers whose combined expertise addresses key aspects of the paper (e.g. topic and method).

Though my personal view (and experience) is that reviewers are not always correct, I, akin to the expert who supplied #12, counsel prudence and tact in correcting your reviewers and editors. Though these are busy people, most seek to be constructive, and crave papers they perceive as having merit. I'm uncertain of what is meant by #14, but again assume the best, and suggest, like #5, that collaboration is highly valuable, with people who complement your areas of lack, and to motivate progress.

#10 and #11 recognise there is chance involved. The review process is undoubtedly fallible, and mismatch of paper with inappropriate reviewers can occur. However the various controls in place (e.g. see APJIS Information to Authors … http://www.apjis.or.kr/) aim to minimize this likelihood.

I would add to the above … don't underestimate the time and effort required (if 3rd tier requires 1 unit of effort, then 2nd tier 10 units and 1st tier 100 … maybe a little exaggerated); insure every sentence has a purpose (doing so will attend to Clarity and Presentation); use commonly understood and accepted terminology and concepts where existing; and be meticulous with concept definitions (conceptual rigor).

Happy writing!